The Song of the Wreck

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The Song of the Wreck

by ClockworkCourier

Summary

Will Graham is a private investigator-turned-teacher living in Victorian London. After a violent murder reveals a possible supernatural cause, Will is pulled back into his former career, but not in a way he expected, and certainly not with one of his fellow teachers as his new partner.

His new path leads him through the back alleys of London, down the glittering streets and deep catacombs of Paris, across one of the many new railroads that cross Europe, and finally to a mysterious castle in Lithuania, where things certainly are not what they seem. Really, Will should have made his retirement announcement more literal.

Notes

This may easily be one of the most self-indulgent fanfics I have written in my entire life. Vampirism, Victoriana, and Hannigram. Yesssss.

I did take plenty of creative license with this. By training, I am a history major, and the Victorian era has always been a particular favorite of mine. However, I don't know everything about it (that's damn near impossible), so I had to fill in a few blanks with my own wild imagination. Corrections are always welcome, since my personal research can't get me everywhere. There's also some needed tweaking to socio-political structure, but it was eeeeextremely necessary.

Anyway, read on and enjoy! I've got a cup of tea that needs rewarming and a nice long nap to take.

See the end of the work for more notes

The Song of the Wreck

The child was slumbering near the blaze:

'O captain, let him rest

Until it sinks, when God's own ways

Shall teach us what is best!'

They watch'd the whiten'd, ashy heap,

They touch'd the child in vain;

They did not leave him there asleep,

He never woke again.

December 24th, 1452

The gravedigger didn't trust the priest, and he couldn't properly give a reason as to why. Perhaps it was the way he introduced himself, grinning with three teeth missing and another two black with rot, and promised to the poor family that the two young souls in those coffins were at rest and in the comfort of the Lord. He then stretched out his knobby hand for the coins, and as they clanged together in his palm, the gravedigger thought of Judas in the potter's field.

Father Ignatius stood over him now, the coins in a pouch tied to his belt, and prayed in solemn Latin. The gravedigger grunted as he flung another shovelful of dirt over his shoulder, narrowly missing the smaller coffin. Ignatius urged the two souls to heaven, where they would suffer no more, and disease would never ravage them again.

"Shame they died so close to the Lord's day," the gravedigger mumbled, sniffing into the thin piece of fabric tied around his face. "I wouldn't call it auspicious."

Ignatius drew in a sharp breath through his teeth, obviously irritated at being interrupted. He craned his neck to look down into the grave and adjusted his vestments, apparently given to him by the Pope himself, if he was to be believed at all. "No better time, my friend," he said thinly, wrinkling his nose as he turned his gaze up to the coffins. "Our Lord may be more accepting of them so close to such a holy day. Less misfortune, I would think, at least."

There was a muffled silence that followed, permeated only by the driving sound of the shovel and the creak of empty trees in the woods.

Neither man noticed the soft crunch of footsteps in the snow until Father Ignatius suddenly

had a hand to his throat, bloody fingers digging in to the soft flesh below his jaw. He did not have time to scream, as his neck was torn open mercilessly, blood splashing onto the snow. The gravedigger managed to look up in time to see the priest falter, one hand reaching up to the hole in his throat in vain. There was no one behind him, and as soon as the gravedigger realized this, he began scrambling out of the hole.

Father Ignatius gasped, choking on his own blood and desperately trying to get a full breath of air. He stumbled toward the coffins, one hand to his neck, the other mindlessly reaching out to nothing. Without warning, he was slammed up against the larger coffin, falling forward, his spine now at an unnatural angle. The creature was barely more than a shadow, growling like a wolf gone rabid. It flipped him onto his back with such force that there was a sound like a snapping branch, and the priest's eyes rolled back into his head.

Then, the creature ripped into his belly, slicing it open effortlessly. Viscera poured out, steaming in the cold. His intestines seemed to unravel before him, and with another slice, they detached completely, streaming blood and waste across the snow. The creature slashed his remaining organs to pieces, and then shoved them into its mouth, feasting on them as though it had been starved.

The gravedigger watched only for a moment more as he stood trembling behind the corner of the tiny chapel. His stomach turned and turned again at the monstrous noises the creature was making. It bore the vague shape of a human, but that was where the similarities ended. It was hideous, its face streaked in gore, dripping with blood. Its mouth was just a gash in its face, lined with gnashing teeth.

It turned its head, and the gravedigger swore it had looked at him. He didn't chance another second more and turned toward the town, running as fast as his legs would carry him. His chest heaved with every breath, his muscles strained hot, his eyes burning.

The gravedigger would never make it back into the town. They would find him as a hideous smear on the side of the road by morning.

It would not be his death or Father Ignatius' vicious disemboweling that would frighten the villagers of the small town. It would be that the two coffins meant for those empty graves in the churchyard would be found wrenched open and empty. Three pairs of bloody footprints would be found in the snow, leading into the woods. Father Ignatius and the gravedigger would occupy the graves instead.

October 15th, 1866

London, England

"The mistake in our current way of thinking lies not in the actual application of medical science, but in our education. We are decades in to the revolutionary procedure known as necropsy, or dissection. Yet our way of approaching it has become less of an attempt to unlock the secrets that the dead may conceal, and more of a sideshow, a distraction."

The man's voice was soft and even, shaped by an accent that was hard to place. It seemed to be at ends with his surroundings, a large operating theater lit wanly by gaslight, its subject being a corpse veiled with a thin white sheet. Dr. Hannibal Lecter presided over the affair, his outer clothes discarded in favor of a white shirt, sleeves rolled to his elbows, and a well-tailored vest. He wore a clean white apron over his clothes, and it was hard to ignore the arsenal of scalpels and saws at his right.

The lecture was well-attended by a wide cross-section of London's intellectual society. Medical professionals sat close to historians, only a row above a large group of law enforcement. There was a scattering of self-professed artists and writers, and the entire crowd was filled in with curious onlookers and medical students. Will Graham sat between two white-haired gentlemen, one intently taking notes, and the other looking progressively more pale as the lecture went on. Will himself was there for two reasons, one more dominant than the other. On a larger part, he was there for personal study. The doctor was very well-respected in London and in his personal field. His lectures always brought in a sizable crowd, and there were few who would ever seek to criticize his methods. Just two months before, he published an essay in the St. Cosmas Medical Journal concerning the treatment of cholera. The essay became a topic of intense discussion in many circles, and in the end, Dr. Lecter became the go-to specialist on treatment of the disease.

The less dominant reason for attendance was simply because Will also taught at St. Cosmas when he had the time. He was between lectures and found himself both bored and intrigued.

Dr. Lecter stood before him now, completely in his element, and Will couldn't help but compare him to a priest at the pulpit. His arms were spread as if he were mid-sermon, his congregation intently listening, and the communion was represented by a literal body, rather than a transubstantiated one.

"We must begin a new stage in this approach," he continued. "Karl Freiherr von Rokitansky, a very respectable pathologist, has claimed to performed tens of thousands of necropsies. I daresay that is an abominable number, and we needn't perform more than what we need. Moderation in all things, so to speak."

The doctor turned to his assistant, a young man dressed similarly in an apron and suit, who reached over and pulled the sheet away. The corpse was a male, young and athletic, by Will's observation. His skin was waxy and white, his fingertips already turning black at the tips. There was very little to immediately observe, save for an angry open gash just under his jawline.

"I would propose a different approach to dissection," Dr. Lecter went on, dipping his fingers into a small clear glass and rubbing the contents over his hands. Dark gray streaks appeared on his skin, telltale of silver nitrate. "Bodies can speak volumes without ever saying a word. We must look past the days of criminal cases going unsolved, as a deceased victim may have many answers hidden under their skin. And from one, you can learn enough to understand hundreds."

With an expert hand, he picked up a scalpel and began dissecting the man. His incisions were

precise and clean. “Here we see our unfortunate Mr. Smith,” he said, pushing away a flap of skin to expose the muscle and bone of his trunk. “A murder victim, perhaps easily recalled in the memories of our investigators in attendance. His throat was cut in the alley behind a boarding house in Whitechapel.”

Will remembered immediately. ‘Mr. Smith’ was actually one Daniel Palmer, the son of a politician from Highgate. He had been reported missing two days before his body was found over a week before the lecture. While Will hadn’t seen the scene itself, he was well aware of it. What perturbed him was that Daniel Palmer was now lying on a table as the subject of an anatomy lecture rather than buried. Apparently, other law enforcement members in attendance thought along the same lines, and shifted uncomfortably in their seats.

Dr. Lecter seemed to expect this reaction and allowed a small grin. “Those of you acquainted with Mr. Smith may wonder about his attendance to our lecture. I can only explain it thus; that his appearance in Whitechapel factored into it.”

Brothels, gambling, other illicit activities. Will could only imagine the disdain that the elder Mr. Palmer would have for his son’s possible activities. It would be a mar on Palmer’s political record, although sentencing his son to a surgeon’s necropsy table did not seem to be a respectable fate.

“Before I continue, I would ask you to imagine our young Mr. Smith, only twenty-three years old, stalking the streets of Whitechapel. How was he dressed that evening? It was raining, I recall. Would he wear his hat, his overcoat? Would his wealth be evident in his choice of dress?”

Unbidden, the images came to Will’s mind. The creeped at the edges of his inner vision.

Rain pouring relentlessly on the filthy streets. Candlelight casts eerie shadows from the darkened windows of the brothels, the boarding houses. There is an acrid smell in the air, coalsmoke and filth. The choking, miserable stench of humanity crammed in close quarters. People do what they must to survive, and they choose despicable occupations. They are nothing more than worms and insects, feeding off the dregs.

Will furrowed his brow and shook himself out of it. His head was already beginning to pound.

“Although the case is recent, there has been little progress as to finding the identity of Mr. Smith’s killer. Through the use of one body, we may not only discover clues as to who this may be, but we may also discover others like him. We do not need hundreds of cadavers to discover what one may tell us.”

Dr. Lecter gestured at the lining of Daniel Palmer’s skin. “Observe this portion of his skin. It is not a stretch to say that our Mr. Smith was an athlete when he was alive. But see this yellow, a lining of fat. He was well-fed. And the muscles here, in his abdomen. This was a man who dined well, and frequented gymnasiums often. There is nothing in his body that would suggest any difficulty in his life. If you were to look at his dentition, however, you may see some rot, a few cavities left untreated. What would this suggest?”

An older gentleman a few rows away from Will raised his hand. Dr. Lecter nodded to him. “A large consumption of sugar,” the man said.

“Indeed you are correct. Mr. Smith was not left wanting for much. So we must wonder why this man, barely a boy, would be wandering a place of squalor.”

The amber light catches the woman’s attention. She smiles, predatory, and runs her fingers down Daniel’s hand. He sighs and turns his head away from her. There, in the dim light, she sees a band of white on his finger.

“He took off his wedding ring,” Will suddenly interjected. Dr. Lecter, as well as the rest of the group, turned to look at him. The sudden attention made him feel very small and he resisted the urge to sink down in his seat. “He, um... There’s a...” He cleared his throat and gestured at the cadaver. “There should be a mark where his wedding ring was. They wouldn’t have... have removed it.” He ducked his head down and cleared his throat again, his face burning.

Without a hitch, Dr. Lecter nodded. “Correct. There is a distinct mark on his ring finger, lighter than the rest of his skin. Your name, sir?”

If Will could have crawled under the floorboards, he would have. “Will Graham, doctor,” he said, hardly louder than a murmur.

“An astute observation, Mr. Graham. Would you be the same gentleman that teaches the class on forensics here?”

Will wordlessly nodded.

“What more might you be able to tell about Mr. Smith, just from observation?” Dr. Lecter asked. He had a peculiar, thinly-veiled expression. At first glance, it seemed curious. Deeper than that, there was satisfaction, pleasure perhaps. Will didn’t know what to make of that.

He took a deep breath through his nose and pushed himself up in his seat to sit a little straighter. His mouth felt dry, his throat tight. “It was his first time in Whitechapel,” Will said, trying desperately to keep the waver out of his voice. “He was married for a few years, but his marriage wasn’t satisfying. He was... angry. Maybe spiteful.”

“A man used to getting his way,” Dr. Lecter agreed. “Anything else?”

His thrusts are desperate, too hard, too uneven. The woman is used to harsh men, but there is something in this one that isn’t right. There is violence under his skin, anger, desperation. She moans regardless, fists her hands in his air, breathes against his neck. She goes through all the motions that she knows, but he is somewhere else. His eyes are wrenched closed, his fingers grip the sheets on either side of her head, the muscles in his neck strain, his jaw is clenched. In that moment, she’s frightened by him.

“He wasn’t violent by nature,” Will went on. The amphitheater seemed to fade away around

him, his vision centered on the corpse. “There’s no ligature marks on him, no signs of a struggle. He didn’t fight anyone, no matter how angry he was. Someone surprised him.”

“Would he have fought if he had known?”

Will shook his head, eyes not moving from the face of Daniel Palmer. The longer he looked, the less restful Daniel seemed to be. “He knew his attacker, even if only for a brief time. He would have trusted...”

The rest of the theater completely disappeared. Will was no longer in the company of any living soul. There was only Daniel, frozen on an operating table. Then, Daniel was standing, still naked and cut open, facing away from him. Will felt the knife in his hand.

A kitchen knife, one hastily grabbed when the Madame wasn’t looking. Will took a step forward, angry, resentful, sick of men like Daniel Palmer. Sick of men so spoiled and full of themselves, with absolutely no regard for the bodies they used. *With her body, which has been used so much, sometimes against her. She can still feel his seed on the inside of her thighs. This is the last time she will ever feel something like that again.*

Daniel Palmer is unaware. He runs his index finger over the wedding band in his pocket. He never sees the knife that cuts into his carotid artery. He never sees *her.*

“The prostitute,” Will finished, feeling the knife drop out of his hand, clattering to the wet cobblestone. “She murdered him.”

It didn’t occur to him for a long moment that he was being watched, that the amphitheater came back into view. Then, he turned his head to look and found dozens of eyes on him, including Dr. Lecter’s. He sank back down in his seat, a cold sensation sweeping through him. “S-sorry,” he muttered, running one hand over his face.

Dr. Lecter, however, seemed enormously satisfied, although it simply manifested as a small smile. “Would there still be evidence?”

Will nodded but didn’t make eye contact. “You would need to look for a kitchen knife, probably thrown away.”

One of the policemen in attendance cleared his throat, looking mildly indignant. “But if his murderer was a prostitute, how could she possibly make such a clean cut?”

“I would observe the steady hands of a seamstress,” Dr. Lecter said. “But gentlemen, if you would wait until after the lecture to make your arrests? It is only polite. Now, we may observe the contents of his stomach. Alan, if you would get my rib cutters, please.”

Will breathed in deep through his nose, his eyes tightly shut, his head pounding even when pressed against the cool glass of the window in the hallway. He hadn’t meant for things to go as they had, especially when he had been so concerned with staying out of the business of

Scotland Yard. Life wasn't so simple, of course. He focused on regulating his breathing, counting to ten repeatedly, trying to flush away the image of Daniel Palmer and his murderess.

It was enough to make him oblivious of someone approaching. Will nearly jumped off the windowsill when his visitor gently jostled his shoulder. To Will's mortification, Hannibal Lecter stood in front of him now completely dressed in a fine overcoat, his hat under one arm. The doctor only looked mildly apologetic, but just as intrigued as he had been in the amphitheater.

"Sorry for interrupting your reverie, Mr. Graham, but I couldn't help but seek you out," he said, holding out one gloved hand. "Dr. Hannibal Lecter. We haven't formally met."

Will returned the shake and looked down at his hand. "Iodine works well on silver nitrate," he said, and then shook his head. "I'm sorry. It's a pleasure to meet you, Dr. Lecter."

"As does sodium cyanide, but it certainly should be used moderately," the doctor returned with a peculiar smile. "And please, just call me Hannibal. Do you work with the Yard?"

Will returned both hands to the pockets of his coat and frowned. "Not anymore. I did several cases with them in the past, but the work was... strenuous."

"So now you teach."

"And do some private consultations. They keep me busy."

Hannibal nodded, looking Will over once with a very keen eye. What ever he saw seemed to please him. "I would ask about how you knew the identity of Daniel Palmer's killer, but it hardly seems like appropriate conversation for a first meeting."

Will managed a wry smile. "An autopsy isn't?"

Hannibal adjusted his grip on his hat, his entire being cutting a figure far too eloquent for the dim and dingy hall of the hospital. He looked like a man appraising an antique, content with what he had seen. "Perhaps it is. Do you know what autopsy means?"

Will frowned, feeling as if he should have known. Finally, he shook his head.

"'To see for oneself'. You could venture to say that our meeting is an autopsy. I had to see you for myself."

That made Will feel scrutinized, like a butterfly pinned in a box. "It was... good to see you in action as well, Dr. Lecter. I read your medical journal on cholera recently, and your essay on Bernard's theory of blood glucose and digestion. You have incredible insight."

"I could say the same. I did attend one of your lectures this past spring. You have a remarkable way of approaching forensic pathology. Regardless," Hannibal glanced to the door leading onto the street. The weather was beginning to turn for the worst. "I would like to

discuss some things with you, but it will have to wait for another time. Dinner, perhaps?"

Unbidden, and completely out of Will's control, his face felt warm again. Realistically, he should have approached it as the meeting of two people with medical knowledge, two essay-writers and lecturers comparing notes. His mind went elsewhere, but he immediately reeled it in and nodded. "Of course," he replied, ignoring how shaky he sounded.

Hannibal gave him another thin smile before putting on his hat and inclining his head. "A pleasure to meet you in person, Mr. Graham. I'll call on you in due time."

Will's voice gave out on him, and he could only give Hannibal the most pathetic attempt at a wave. It was only when Hannibal left the building altogether that Will noticed how fast his heart was racing.

By the time Will returned to his apartment, the clouds above London had turned the color of tarnished silver, and mist had given way to light sprinkles of rain. He ducked into the doorway just as thunder began to rumble. The foyer was pleasantly warm, and he could smell the familiar scent of the landlady's favorite Darjeeling tea. Will shouldered off his coat and draped it over his arm as he began to ascend the stairs.

"Oh, Will?" The landlady's voice stopped him, and she came around the corner from her sitting room only a second later. In her hand were two envelopes, which she held up to him. "You have a letter from Jack Crawford from Scotland Yard. He came by earlier, but I said you were indisposed."

Will frowned and looked at the envelopes. "And the other?"

"Invitation to tea with Miss Katz, in her words 'in case you didn't want to visit Jack'."

At that, a smile crept onto his face immediately. "Thank you, Anna."

She smiled back, and then tilted her head. "Are you feeling alright, Will? You're looking a bit pale. I can have Sarah bring you up some tea and biscuits if you would like."

"No, thank you. Just tired," he replied, although her concern was touching. "If Jack comes again, tell him I'm still indisposed."

"Of course."

"Oh, and Anna?"

She looked up at him expectantly.

"If Dr. Hannibal Lecter comes today, you can send him up."

"Certainly." She smiled and swept back into her sitting room.

Will continued his ascent to his apartment, allowing himself to dwell on the two envelopes. Jack Crawford and Beverly Katz were expatriates like himself, all leaving at various times during the war. Jack had found himself a fine and secured position at Scotland Yard after an illustrious career in Baltimore. Beverly Katz worked privately under Jack as an investigator, and was easily one of the best Will had ever met. Even after Will had tried to retire from his short-lived career at the Yard, he and Beverly had maintained a good friendship.

For both Jack and Beverly to call on him in the same day only meant one thing; there was a crime that they needed his assistance with. Or, more specifically, Jack needed his help and Beverly was already trying to cushion the impact. If they were that desperate, it made Will dread what they might have found.

He unlocked his apartment and found it a bit tidier than when he had left. Anna was a meticulous housekeeper, and he was grateful that he was the sort with very little to hide. Once he closed the door behind him, placing both his hat and jacket on the end table beside the door, he opened Jack's envelope, being met with the quick scrawl of a hastily written note.

Will

Need you at the Yard in the morning. Can pay you better than the hospital.

Jack

As far as pleas for assistance went, it was awful. Will was tempted to crumple up the note and burn it. He tossed it on top of his jacket and opened Beverly's note instead.

Will,

By now, Jack has probably visited and asked you to come to the Yard. I certainly will not blame you if you don't go. However, whether or not you do, I'd like to cordially (they use that word all the time here, I noticed) invite you to high tea with me tomorrow, since we are now official London-folk. If you do not dress for the occasion, I will not hesitate to put you in a bustle.

-Beverly

Will smiled and folded the note up, placing it beside the other one. He regarded both for a moment longer before sighing and picking them back up. He walked into his sitting room, sitting down beside the unlit fireplace, gazing at both pieces of paper in the dim gaslight while the thunder and lightning threatened outside.

Just in that afternoon, he had solved a case that it had taken the Yard a week to investigate, and they still hadn't solved it. He resumed his position of sitting behind the eyes of a murderer and did what his former colleagues could not. When he had quit with the Yard, he had been insistent and, as he believed, incredibly clear with Jack about the conditions of his retirement. If Jack had to call on him, and Beverly felt the need to support him in her own

way, it was important.

His head was still pounding, and the image of Daniel Palmer's corpse on the table was still an impression behind his closed eyelids. His entire body seemed to protest the very idea of returning to the Yard for a case.

He decided to go.

In the ghosts' moonshine

Chapter Notes

Thank you to everyone who left kudos or commented. I'm amazed at the reaction this got, and it made me so enthusiastic to keep going with both writing and planning. It's become a sort of second NaNoWriMo project, and I'm not exactly complaining about it! My word count for this certainly didn't hurt (as I weep a little at the 7000+ words of this chapter).

This chapter was both fun and frustrating to write. I found out I'm not the most stellar at writing crime scenes (or at least weird ones like the one in this chapter). It was more difficult than I thought to replicate Will's thought process when he checks out crime scenes, and it was harder still to write him trying to go on after being interrupted. Here's to hoping I did it semi-well. Some episode rewatches might be in order! I'm also hunting for a beta to help me out with this, since currently I'm writing and editing, and thus prone to miss quite a few things until a few days later. Fingers crossed that I find a good one! Until then, please bear with my sad excuse for an editing job.

Anyway, thank you again and enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Let us drink then, my raven of Cairo.

Is that the wind dying? O no;

It's only two devils, that blow

Through a murderer's bones, to and fro,

In the ghosts' moonshine.

The next morning came with a chill that told of the oncoming winter. Will awoke feeling a headcold threatening him, and was beyond grateful to find that the landlady had already stoked a fire downstairs. After he had dressed, he descended, sniffing the entire way, to the sitting room. Anna came in moments later, carrying a steaming cup of tea. She handed it to him before shuffling to his front and looking him over with a frown.

"You look utterly miserable, Will. Should you really be going out today? The weather's looking awful," she said.

Will spared a glance out the window. Rain made warped patterns on the glass, turning the

drenched street into a warp of gray and black. He sighed and took a sip of the tea, hoping that somehow the small portion would warm his entire body.

“Honestly, I don’t want to,” he replied, sniffing again. “But it must have been an emergency if both Jack *and* Beverly called.”

Anna looked as though she wanted to argue, but she stepped away to prod at the fire instead. “I’m not terribly fond of what the Yard has you do,” she said quietly, not looking away from the fire. “You are *much* too good of a person to see those dreadful things.”

“Someone has to,” Will said. He was, at least, thankful that Anna was so concerned for his wellbeing. Other than people like her, her sister Sarah, and Beverly, he didn’t have many people to turn to when things became overwhelming. Anna did fret like a mother more often than not, but it was better than having no one to fret over him at all.

He finished his tea just as the other tenant came down for breakfast. Anna busied herself with making another cup of tea while Will shouldered on his overcoat.

She didn’t look up as she spoke. “I’ll have some hot water going for a bath for when you get back.”

“Anna, you don’t have to--”

“Yes, I do,” she retorted, and Will noticed the slight tremble in her hands as she handled the cup. “I don’t have a good feeling about this one.”

“I’ll be careful,” he said, more solemnly than he would have liked. “I always come back.”

Anna didn’t reply, save for clearing her throat. Before Will could say another word to her, she turned to give the other tenant his cup.

The Yard was only a few blocks away, but in the frigid rain and wind, it felt like a monumental journey. Cold water seeped up the back of his trousers and got in his shoes, and the rain managed to soak under the collar of his shirt, despite his hat and coat. By the time he got to the Yard, he was a shivering, sniffing mess, and sorely wished he had sat in front of the fire for the rest of the day. At the very least, he wasn’t alone. Of all the people standing nearby, he didn’t spot a single person who looked the least bit pleased.

The inside of the Yard was only a little better. It was still cold, but it was dry. Jack Crawford was waiting for him near one of the closest pillars, his expression just as dismal as the weather. He only perked up a little at the sight of Will.

“You came,” he said plainly. “Thank you.”

“Only for the day. If this is a big case, I’m only here to examine the crime scene.”

“Right,” Jack replied, seeming a bit disappointed. “Well, there’s a lot to examine. We’ll take a carriage to it.”

They started walking back outside, and Will felt a distinct chill he couldn’t associate with the weather. “Where are we going?”

“Corner of Warner Place and Hackney.”

Will’s eyes widened, and the chill spread. “Old Nichol?”

“Unfortunately.”

Old Nichol was a slum among slums, rivaling St. Giles and the Devil’s Acre. It was one of London’s most famous ‘rookeries’, a crown jewel of misfortune and destitution. Will had, up to that point, never gotten close to it. The crimes committed within its walls were hardly ever of the Yard’s concern, and most people who resided within didn’t have the money for a private investigator. The dead, no matter how viciously maimed, would simply carry their secrets to the potter’s field or the anatomist’s table.

“What happened, Jack?” he finally asked as they reached the carriage. No matter how tightly he pulled his coat around himself, the cold bit through. “You don’t investigate crimes in places like that.”

Jack’s hand was on the bar of the carriage, and he paused and turned to look Will in the eye. “No, we don’t,” was all he said before he stepped in.

Will followed suit, sitting across from Jack and feeling like the walls of the carriage were closer than they actually were. It started with a lurch, and Will grit his teeth against the bumps of the cobblestone. Jack’s eyes were on him the whole while, expectant of an answer to a question he hadn’t asked.

“What, do you want me to guess?” Will asked, desperate to break the silence that was quickly becoming oppressive.

“First, I want to know why you disappeared for months without a word.”

“You *know* why.”

Jack crossed his arms over his chest, far from impressed. “I know that you were one of the best damn investigators London had ever had, and we had a winning streak going. What changed? Why didn’t you say anything?”

Will couldn’t quell the sardonic smile that twisted the corner of his mouth. “You know, you show me enough bodies with gouged out organs and heads ripped open, and it might do a little damage,” he replied, feeling more confident than he had the last time they had spoken.

Clearly, Jack didn’t appreciate his confidence. He jerked forward, one hand on his knee, the other on the lapel of Will’s coat. His eyes were too bright, too angry. Will recoiled, but hit the

cushion instead of drawing back a safe distance.

“Listen,” Jack started, his new anger fanning embers that had been left smoldering when Will left. “You want to talk about damage? Look around you! It’s you or the hundreds of people that die in this city every year. You know what damage is? It isn’t just the bodies. It’s all of those families that have to be told that we have no idea who killed their loved ones, and we have to leave it at that. You think I enjoy that? Do you think I go home every night and think about how happy I am and how wonderful my job is?”

“You don’t...” Will paused, feeling his jaw ache when he realized he had been gritting his teeth the entire time. He relaxed his jaw and cleared his throat, just as Jack let go of him. “You don’t have to *be* those killers, Jack.”

“No, I don’t,” Jack replied. Both of his hands rested on his knees, fingers clenched into fists. “But you are literally the only one who can. You have put serial killers away for good. It’s been through you that we have hanged some of London’s most despicable criminals.”

“Should’ve kept the Tyburn tree up,” Will muttered.

“Will,” Jack said, louder this time. “I’m asking you to be one, just one more time.”

“Why? What’s different about this one?”

They hit another bump and Will flinched. Jack was as still as stone. It seemed like ages before he finally spoke again. “His victim was cut up with such precision that he looked like he was ready to be strung up like a marionette. There wasn’t a single drop of blood left in him.”

Will felt the blood drain out of his face, perhaps in solidarity. “What?”

Only then did Jack break eye contact. He looked frustrated, palming the fist of one hand into the other. “I have no idea. No one knows. There was no sign of a struggle. Everything in his room was exactly the way he had left it.”

“Who was he?”

“He signed into his room as ‘John Thomas’. You can’t get much more vague than that.”

“His room?”

“This place called the Belfry Inn. A nice way of saying he lived in a room in a godawful boarding house on the corner of Warner Place and Hackney Street. He had rented it about three months before he was killed.”

Will frowned, glancing out the window at the tarnished gray of London. “Why would he rent a room in one of the worst slums in the city?” he asked, more to himself than to Jack.

“That’s what we’d like to find out,” Jack replied. “Or, that’s what we’d like *you* to find out.”

One nominal difference between England and the United States was the development of slums in the largest cities. In the States, the slums were relatively new, formed from the working class needing a cheap place to rest their heads. Thieves and prostitutes formed their roosts nearby, attracted by low costs. It was almost neat in the formation, and it had been done over the course of a century, and then some. Boston, New York, Baltimore, and others like them had developed little copses of degeneration. Yet it was viewed as a delicate balance between rich and poor, the lavish and the lacking.

In England, it was very different. The slums were open wounds from centuries before, left to fester, untreated. Even the appearance was different. Where the slums of the States were tilted houses and smoke-black walls, those of its English counterparts were hunchbacked like an old widow, bent by burden, choked in ash and rot. Sewage was left in the open, children tossed its way as naked little sprites flitting mindlessly from stoop to stoop. There was nothing clean or correct about it. Disease and death made interesting bedfellows in the narrow rooms of the rickety tenements. A family of six would sleep in a single bed, and wake with one less of their brood by morning. No doctor could be summoned. Only a priest, when it was feasible, and he would simply beseech the grieving family to pray, more for themselves than their dearly departed. The dead was faring far better than them.

It all came to mind as Will gazed out of the small windows of the carriage, onto the filthy streets of Old Nichol. He remembered Anna and Sarah speaking of it before when he had first come to London. They mused on its name, and Sarah supposed it was like the stories, that the name was hand in hand with the Devil's name of Old Nick. He had his Acre near Westminster, and St. Giles was his right hand man. Old Nichol must have been his true stomping grounds, and stomp he did.

Will watched a little girl, clothed only in a robe three times her size, gaping at the carriage as it tumbled toward Hackney Street. Her eyes were wide and watery, darkness like bruises beneath them. He had to look away.

They reached the Belfry Inn, where two policeman stood guard at its door, looking magnificently uncomfortable. An old woman stood between them, her face stretched so thin that it looked to be little more than pale dough stretched over her skull. The frown she had was deep enough to be etched permanently on her face, and it only deepened when Jack and Will approached.

"Ye *finally* come," she snapped, her arms crossed tightly over her chest. "Been holdin' up business. Bastard dies and I can't make a *bit* o' money. Well, curse him!" She spat on the stoop.

"Ma'am, we told you we could give you a stipend for your time," Jack said, keeping his voice level.

"Then pay it and quit waggin' your lips about it!" she retorted, her voice very similar to the shriek of an unhappy bird.

Jack turned to Will before they walked onto the stoop. “The doctor’s on his way here to examine the body more thoroughly.”

Will nodded wordlessly, and they stepped inside.

The interior was just as Will had imagined. It was dingy and damp, the entire building creaking and shuddering when anything stronger than a gentle breeze blew. The walls and ceiling were gray and black from coal and woodsmoke, and it was impossible to tell what color they might have been before. There was a small fire flickering near the back of the sitting room, in front of a couch clearly filched from some pawn shop, as the mohair was ruined and rotting. The stairs were falling apart, and looked as though any more weight put upon them would overwhelm them, and send the ascendant straight to the cellar.

The old woman brisked past them towards the fire, grunting and griping the entire way. “I’d offer ya tea, but, y’see, we ain’t have water ‘ceptin’ a few minutes a day,” she snipped. “So you gents’ll have to go thirsty.”

“Not a problem, ma’am,” Jack said, walking towards the stairs. “If the doctor comes, send him up.”

“Fine, fine,” the woman muttered with a wave of her hand.

Jack went up the stairs first, as carefully as he could. Each step groaned like a phantom under his weight, and Will waited until he was completely upstairs before he tried the same.

They went to the very last room in the narrow hallway. All the other tenants had been cleared out for the time, and there were no bystanders. It made for an eerie scene overall, as the silence cut only by the creaks and moans of an empty house. Jack opened the door for him and stood aside.

The scene that Will met was so beyond anything he had seen before that it was hard to imagine that the *thing* on the bed had once been a living, breathing human. John Thomas, if that was truly his name, was the color of plaster, and seemed just as solid. There was hardly a human tint to his skin, no pink nor mottled gray. He was simply void of shade.

His naked body was disjointed, just as Jack had said. His head was separated from his shoulders, his arms cut away from his torso, cut again at the elbows and the wrists. His torso was bisected at the diaphragm, his legs cut from his hips, and again at the knees and ankles. He lay in perfect arrangement on an undisturbed bed, eyes and lips closed. A small trunk lay at the end of his bed, without a lock. Other than that, there was nothing suggesting he had ever made his home in the tiny room.

Will slowly walked up to the corpse, biting down on his bottom lip as his eyes swept over the arrangement. It was *perfect*, and that was more disturbing than even the most gory scenes he had found. At least in those, there was a motive. The more violent the crime, the angrier the motive became. The gash on Daniel Palmer’s neck spoke for the rage of the young prostitute that killed him. On John Thomas, there was nothing, save for the obvious. The act was

impersonal, somehow, despite bearing enormous connotations. It made Will's head begin to throb.

"Do we know anything else?" he asked through his teeth, trying to find an anchor in the void.

"Immigrant, according to the... innkeeper," Jack said from behind him. "She guessed he was Russian. So much for being a 'John Thomas'."

An immigrant hiding himself away in one of the most notorious slums in the Western world. Will looked closer at his face, his close-cut beard, his lack of acne or pockmarks, handsome even in death. There was a notable scar underneath his left ear, and a few on his arms and torso, but nothing else. No signs of a hard life or a struggle. His dark hair was a little mussed, but that could have been from sleep or from the effort needed to move him around on the bed.

Will took in a deep breath through his nose, smelling more woodsmoke than the familiar stench of a corpse. Jack took it as his cue and closed the door behind him as he stepped into the hallway.

And Will faded, bit by bit, until he was in the skin of the killer.

The room changed. John Thomas was whole again, still nude, still lying supine on the bed. The world outside was dark, save for the pit fires in the street.

He is unassuming, when he should be careful. He has let his guard down, and that is his first mistake.

Will stepped forward until he was looming above the sleeping man. The only thing Will held was a small scalpel, his baggage left by the door.

The landlady does not know I am here. She's too deep in her bottle of cheap liquor to notice there is one more tenant than normal. This man... knows. He knows?

Will frowned, furrowing his brow. His grip on the scalpel tightened, but as the man on the bed moved in his sleep, he hid the blade under the long sleeve of his coat. The man's eyes opened, and he smiled.

He does not recognize me like this. He thinks I am just a friendly face he saw in a pub. Tonight, I was his... lover. Yet this is not the reason he hides. He knows social scorn, but his current fear drives him deeper into the abyss, into my arms. He craves safety.

The man mouthed something to Will, but his voice was lost to the creaks of the house and the moan and rattle of the wind on the window. One arm came up, his hand brushing against Will's cheek. Will felt something hot in the base of his stomach, not disgust or revulsion. *Excitement.*

His defenses are down, and he thinks he is safe. The threat that followed him has lost his trace in Old Nichol. There is no way it can find him in this filthy tenement. But...

It has found him.

Will snarled and cut into the man's femoral artery with one precise slice of the scalpel. The man's eyes widened, his mouth shut tight as he drew in a gasp through his nose. His hand fell back down to the bed as blood began to pour and spurt--

No.

I will not waste it. It cannot be soaked up by these sheets. It cannot fall onto the floor. It's too valuable.

Will took a step back, and the man slept again.

No, he did not sleep. His eyes were closed in ecstasy. There was a moan on his lips and his eyes had only opened a fraction when the scalpel cut into his leg. There was a receptacle already closeby, but the blood needed to be slowed before it could be put into use.

The man is not hung from the ceiling in order to be exsanguinated. His blood is pulled from him, first by my worship, my--

The door opened behind Will, jerking him out of his reverie. He turned quickly, defensively, only to be met by a familiar face.

"Hello, Will Graham," said Hannibal Lecter. His face was mildly apologetic, and Jack's face even moreso as he stood behind him in the hallway. "I did not mean to interrupt."

Will's chest heaved, partially from the recollection itself, and partially from the unbidden stirring between his legs. He swallowed heavily before nodding and standing aside to let Hannibal in. "It's alright. I wasn't really... getting anywhere with him."

"That does not seem to be the case," Hannibal replied good-naturedly before turning to observe the corpse. He tilted his head a fraction and sighed. "Jack certainly wasn't exaggerating the poor man's state."

It took Will a moment to collect himself as Hannibal began examining the corpse. It was another moment before he could bring himself to speak.

"Dr. Lecter? What are you doing here?" he managed.

Hannibal continued his examination as he spoke. "I am here at the behest of Jack Crawford. Your usual examiner is away on holiday, and I was asked to be his temporary replacement."

"You know Jack?"

"Yes. I have done some forensic investigation for him in the past," Hannibal affirmed.

"You didn't mention anything yesterday," Will replied, although he immediately felt foolish for pointing it out.

Hannibal glanced at Will over his shoulder. “We did not have much time to converse, unfortunately,” he said, although he sounded amused. He went back to his observation, pausing only once to look up at the ceiling, presumably to figure out how the victim could have been so cleanly exsanguinated. “Curious,” was all he said on the matter.

“He wasn’t tied up,” Will said, bending down to open the latch on the trunk. “And he didn’t struggle. His blood had to have been forced out of him.”

Inside of the trunk was a few clothing items and a long rosary. Will picked up one of the jackets in the trunk, finding it to be unusually heavy. He unrolled the jacket, finding a small leatherbound journal tied shut with twine hidden within. He stood up and opened it, not entirely surprised to find the entire thing written in Cyrillic. “I figured as much,” he muttered, leafing through the journal for anything familiar.

Hannibal glanced at him again.

Will showed him one of the pages depicting a fairly well-drawn human skull. “The woman downstairs thought he might have been Russian, despite the name he gave her.”

“May I?” Hannibal asked, holding a hand out. Will handed it to him, and Hannibal attentively looked it over. After a few pages, the corner of his mouth quirked up. “He chose very interesting subject matter.”

“You can read it?”

“I was taught Russian at a very young age, mostly out of necessity. Ah, you may want to call Jack in here.”

Will did so, motioning Jack in with a wave of his hand. Jack frowned at the body before nodding to Hannibal. “You found something?”

“A name, to start with,” Hannibal said, not looking up from his study. “Your victim may very well have been Pyotr Demidov, if the writer of this journal is the same man. It could potentially be an alias.”

“How do you figure?”

Hannibal opened to a certain page before handing it to Jack. Will looked over Jack’s shoulder to see a page depicting another skull bearing four fangs where it’s front teeth should be. On the opposite page was a colored sketch of a blue-violet flower.

“Wolfsbane is the plant,” Hannibal said, turning back to his current client. “A highly toxic but very beautiful flowering perennial. It’s particularly notable in western Russia for its propensity to protect against the undead.”

Jack raised an eyebrow. “You’re saying that our victim was hiding from *ghosts?*”

“Vampires,” Will said, pointing at the skull. “And he wasn’t drained of blood like he should have been. There was a concentrated effort to make sure there wasn’t a single drop left in him.”

The sigh that escaped Jack was sheer exhaustion and frustration condensed. He closed his eyes and pinched the bridge of his nose. “You cannot possibly be telling me a *vampire* killed him.”

“No, not necessarily,” Hannibal replied, and then looked to Will expectantly. “I might be so bold as to think you already have something of an answer to that.”

The thought made Will feel nauseous, and he glanced at the cut on Pyotr’s leg. “Whoever killed him knew what he was afraid of. It was... a joke.”

“A joke that cost him his life, Will,” Jack said, rather brusquely. “I need more than that.”

Nipping and licking at the inside of his thigh, feeling the warmth of the blood rushing just under his skin. One cut is all that he needs.

Will screwed his eyes shut. “He was followed here. Or someone was given information about him. He couldn’t completely hide his identity, even as far away as he was from his home. But he wasn’t kidnapped or attacked outright. There was never a struggle.”

“No ligature marks, no bruising,” Hannibal affirmed. “Nothing that would suggest he tried to fight back.”

“He trusted the person who attacked him,” Will continued, already recalling the image of Pyotr moaning. He didn’t bring that part up to Jack, at least not yet. “His attacker worked fast, and his death was almost painless. He bled out.”

“But there was no blood on the scene,” Jack retorted, crossing his arms over his chest.

“Therein lies the joke,” Hannibal replied, gesturing to the cut on Pyotr’s leg as he put the journal on the floor next to the bed. “He was given a clean, near surgical cut to the femoral artery. It was premeditated.”

Will nodded, edging closer to the bed, observing the pieces of what was left of Pyotr Demidov. “His blood was gathered, I’m guessing through use of tubes or... or something. A funnel, maybe.”

“For what?” Jack asked. “Who would need that much blood?”

“It may not have necessarily been needed, if at all,” Hannibal replied. “Although we cannot rule out the possibility of a form of grave robbing, or perhaps something more spiritual. It may have been in the spirit of stealing bodies for medical use. Blood can be used for a myriad of things.”

“Alright, so what about cutting him up?” Jack gestured to the precise cuts that divided Pyotr

into nearly a dozen pieces.

Will hadn't gotten there in the recollection, but he reached as far as he could, pushed against the fabric of the memory until he could feel a sliver of cold in his palm from the scalpel.

The blood is safely stowed, for now. It will not be disturbed, so I have time to be precise. I admire him for the moment, the beauty of his body. He is a marble Adonis in perfect repose. I yearn to take him apart in a different way than what I accomplished only hours before. Part of me expects stone in place of flesh, with how flawless he looks. My hands are guided purely by expertise, and I work him apart with such finesse that it could be called art. He is my canvas, and out of respect to the masters, I do my best to preserve him in this moment. When they search him, they will find the one thing missing that I kept for myself, the one thing he gave me.

His eyes shot open and he was at Hannibal's side in an instant. "Turn his torso over," he demanded.

Hannibal eyed him, but schooled his expression to be nearly nonexistent. "What do you expect to find?"

"This wasn't a joke," Will replied, anxious. "This was... Goddamnit, he was being *respectful*. He didn't want to ruin the image."

Thankfully, Hannibal didn't question Will further. With utmost care, he shifted Pyotr's torso onto its side, revealing a poignant fist-sized hole on his back left side. Like the rest of his dismemberment, it was done with exact precision. It looked as if it had been simply punched into his skin with a tool, rather than cut in with a scalpel. Jack grunted and took a step back, while Hannibal carefully investigated the hole.

Will didn't need to hear Hannibal's conclusion. He knew exactly what was done. He could almost feel Pyotr's heart in his hand as a warm, solid weight.

"His heart has been removed," Hannibal said, gently setting the torso back as it was. "It was done by a surgical hand. Nothing else was disturbed. It was hardly a simple procedure."

Will knew Jack was waiting for answers, but every conclusion that he arrived to just made him steadily more nauseous and frustrated. There was a painful pulsing at his temples, and his throat felt mercilessly tight. With every passing second, his stomach churned with more and more ferocity. Jack turned to him, waiting, and Will felt the need to escape. The room was closing in on him, the filthy walls shrinking until they felt like a casket, pressed tight to his sides. He could barely make out Hannibal asking him if he was alright before Will abruptly excused himself to a room across the hall.

He slammed the door behind him, gasping for breath. Sweat beaded along his hairline and above his lips. His thoughts and theories violently clashed with mismatched memories belonging to Pyotr's murderer. Nothing made sense, as images of a content Pyotr were mangled by the strangling hands of other murderers. Daniel Palmer took his place for a moment before his throat was cut, gaping open like a second mouth. Then they were both in

the room with Will, whole again, but clearly dead.

“Why?” Daniel asked.

“Who?” asked Pyotr.

Will couldn’t reply. He wanted to press the heels of his hands to his eyes and drown out their images with phosphenes. But his hands were shaking, clammy and cold at his sides.

“Will,” Daniel said, his voice coming from two places on his body, like a raspy echo. “Tell me. Tell me why.”

Pyotr eyed him with irises like the boiling silver of the London sky. “He loved me, Will. But who was he?”

“I don’t know,” Will managed, his voice trembling. “I can’t... I just don’t *know.*”

Suddenly, it was just him and Pyotr. Daniel disappeared into the darkness of the room, a coalsmoke stain on the wall. Pyotr took a step toward him, clear lines carved into his skin from the scalpel and saw that dismembered him. Will expected anger on Pyotr’s face, but he found only pity, perhaps a wistfulness. He watched the line erupt across Pyotr’s neck, bloodless and black like a stripe of ink. “You forgive the ones you love,” he said, his words curled with the sounds of the Russia he left behind. “I forgive him.”

“How?” Will asked, the tightness in his throat practically choking him.

He could almost feel Pyotr’s hand on him, his wrist separating from his arm as he brushed his fingers over Will’s cheek. “You have to see.”

And then he was gone. Will could feel his fingers resting on his cheekbone, still tingling on his skin like effervescence. His chest began to heave and he screwed his eyes shut, waiting for the panic to subside.

“Will?”

Will turned, still hyperventilating, to see Hannibal stepping into the room, his hand still on the door handle. Hannibal’s hands were on his face in a second, warm and dry and calloused. They grounded him, pulled him back into the room and away from the phantoms he was trying to chase. Without thinking, he leaned into his hands, waiting to be completely anchored to where he started.

“Will, listen to me,” Hannibal said. “You are in the Belfry Inn, in Old Nichol. Wherever you were, you are not there anymore. Do you understand?”

Wordless, Will nodded.

“Now what did you see?”

His hands fell away from Will's face, and Will wanted nothing more than to grab them and put them back. He closed his eyes again and shook his head. "They weren't real," he said. There were still impressions of the two ghosts burnt into his eyes like sunlight.

"Who were they?" Hannibal asked, honestly curious.

"Pyotr and... Daniel," Will replied, feeling heat rush to his face. The longer he stood there and collected himself, the more mortified he became at the state Hannibal found him in. They had only formally known each other for a little more than a day, and Hannibal already had to reel Will in from what ever sort of flight of mind he was having.

"Were they dead?"

Will opened his eyes and nodded.

"Did you come to any conclusions about their deaths?"

He hesitated to reply, but Hannibal seemed expectant, less so than Jack. "Not Daniel," Will said honestly. "Just Pyotr. But, every conclusion I arrive at seems so ridiculous, it couldn't be possible."

"Nothing you would want to discuss with Jack, you mean."

"It's not a conclusion I want to say to *myself,*" Will replied, smiling mirthlessly.

There was a thoughtful silence that stretched between them before Hannibal spoke again. "It's possible that your culprit was a cult-led fanatic," he said. "He may have fancied himself supernatural in some sense. We are out of our Age of Reason, after all. The occult and paranormal are becoming vogue, in a sense."

"Are you saying that as something I should tell Jack, or are you being serious?"

If Will had blinked at the wrong time, he would have missed the smirk on Hannibal's face. "That depends entirely on you, Will. I'm simply the attending physician."

He couldn't tell Jack what he truly thought. Neither of them could, regardless of how educated either of them were, or how respectable Hannibal was in his field and in the field of law enforcement. If anything, it would require more effort into the investigation than what the Yard was willing to give for a case in a rookery. To some degree, it would also need to be avoided in order to stem any sort of public response, be it hysteria or protest. To say it was cult activity might bring about some religious response with fervor, but it would be handled far more quietly than if someone at the Yard outright said it was a vampire. Will's head pounded a little more at the very thought of it.

"Alright," he finally said, feeling his stomach clench at the thought. "I'll tell Jack."

Jack was waiting for him outside of the room, the door to Pyotr's room closed. At the end of the hall, at the top of the stairs, the innkeeper was waiting, looking both expectant and

infuriated. Will sighed through his nose and ignored her, turning his attention back to Jack.

“Whoever your killer is has to be part of a cult. Their rights might involve the use of human blood and a heart for sacrifice,” he said, but his words sounded hollow to his own ears. “You would be looking for a highly educated male, more than likely a surgeon.”

“You mean like Dr. Lecter?” Jack asked with a thin smile. When Will didn’t say anything, Jack sighed and crossed his arms over his chest. “And you’re sure about this?”

“Yes.”

“You don’t sound very sure. You might want to think it over a little more before we put a pen to anything official.”

Will frowned and shook his head. “No, I’m sure. Cultist. Educated. Surgeon. Best to start looking now before he catches wind of it.”

Jack eyed him for awhile before sighing again and starting towards the stairs.

There was another silence before Hannibal walked around him from behind, opening the door to Pyotr’s room. Will didn’t follow him in, but watched as he took the journal that he had left on the floor. He walked back out to the hallway, tucking the journal into his vest. He turned his attention to Will, his expression staying static. “I expect you wish to continue this investigation independently?”

Will wanted to retort that all he had planned to do was investigate the scene and report to Jack, not to go any further than that. But his protests promptly retreated back down his throat before they could be heard. Instead, he nodded without a word.

“Then I would be more than happy to assist in my own way. I can provide a translated journal in a few days.”

“A few *days?*” Will asked, expecting Hannibal to say something closer to a month.

Instead, it seemed Hannibal took the question another way. “Or sooner, if it’s pressing.”

“No, no, it’s not that,” Will amended, putting his hands up like a half-surrender. “It just seems like it would need more time.”

“I can repeat my invitation for dinner and give it to you then, if you would like.”

Will felt a familiar jerk in his chest, although he didn’t have a proper name for the sensation. Instead, he opted to nod, his heart thrumming uncomfortably in his chest. “Alright,” he said, and amended again, embarrassed. “I mean, thank you, Dr. Lecter. I appreciate it.”

He couldn’t tell if the curl to Hannibal’s lips was a smirk or an actual smile. It was difficult to decode, and before Will could even try, Hannibal took his leave towards the stairs. Will heard the innkeeper say something rather harsh to him, or maybe it was civil but got gnarled in her

dialect.

All Will could think about was how much he was looking forward to their meeting. With the promise, Daniel Palmer and Pyotr Demidov temporarily disappeared in his mind's eye.

Will had to walk almost three blocks over to call a decent carriage. By the time he reached the carriage, he was drenched again, muck clinging to the hem of his pants and staining his shoes. Fortunately, he was in the belief that Beverly wouldn't care, despite her threats to shove him into a bustle. He told the carriage driver to take him to Bloomsbury Square, and was enormously relieved to see the dreary crooked houses of the rookery fade into respectable middle-class homes, and then finally give way to lavishly decorated townhouses and storefronts.

Beverly was settled in a stone-white townhouse on the western end of the square. Even in the rain, fashionable ladies went from door to door in their finest, despite the area being more high middle-class than anything. Will idly remembered Beverly's chief complaint about how the ladies she became acquainted with were far more interested in the state of their fine china or the shine of the silver tea services than anything else. He also remembered with amusement her rant about how the scandals that rocked Bloomsbury Square were less about the violent crimes Beverly was used to and more about how young Mrs. So-and-So 'made eyes' at another married man during a ball and waved her fan at him in a 'coquettish way'. Mrs. So-and-So was henceforth dubbed the 'Jezebel of Bloomsbury', among other colorful nicknames, hardly stopping at 'harlot'.

Will thought about that as he stepped away from the carriage and walked towards the door leading to Beverly's apartment. He let himself in, as if Beverly was truly surprised at his appearance, she might not hesitate to break his fingers or put him in a chokehold. Thankfully, when he entered the apartment, she was already waiting on the fainting couch, book in hand.

Beverly Katz did not look more out of place than she did in that moment. Her apartment was provided by the funds of Mr. Zeller and Mr. Price, two Scotland Yard investigators who found themselves relying on her opinion more often than not, even though she didn't formally work for the Yard. In gratitude, combined with an anonymous donation from someone Will assumed was higher up on the political hierarchy and possibly in debt to Beverly for whatever reason, she was provided with a beautiful apartment in a somewhat fashionable area of London. However, that was where her graciousness ended. Her apartment was decorated beautifully, with silks and floral prints as far as the rooms stretched. Porcelain vases stood as sentinels along with polished hardwoods, and paintings of Regency women gazed down at the scene serenely as their charge ranted and raved about her conditions.

She would have been far happier where Will lived, and doing what Will did. Beverly was not meant for London social life. She could only do so many tea parties and debuts before she would start clawing at the walls like a madwoman meant for Bedlam. Even the outfits she was shoved into seemed to restrict her, only stemming some of her dammed frustration.

Even at that moment, she was stuffed into a dark violet dress and a pale blue shawl. Her hair

was hastily pinned back, despite her enjoyment of it being let free. She eyed him over the edge of her book before grinning and tossing it onto the chair across from her.

“About time you showed up. Did Jack tie you to a chair or something?”

“Sort of,” Will replied, holding out an arm to help her up. She snorted and got up on her own, but pat him on the arm for his trouble.

“Alright, sit down and tell me everything,” she commanded, slinking rather than shuffling to the small table closest to the window facing the square. There was a steaming teapot already in place, and two cups waiting. She sat down and poured her own cup, not bothering with his.

Will sat down and sighed, rubbing his temples as he did so. “I don’t even know where to start,” he said, trying not to sound too petulant or frustrated about it.

“The beginning is usually a pretty good place.”

“I think he got killed by a vampire,” Will said as means of a start.

He thought she might laugh, maybe literally splitting the side of her dress. Instead, she raised her eyebrows as she swirled her tea in the cup. When he didn’t go on, she nodded. “And?”

“And what? It’s ridiculous. Vampires don’t exist.”

“They might. You don’t know. You ever meet one?”

“No, and I don’t expect to,” he said, although he had to admit he was already feeling better about the whole thing from talking to her.

“Alright, but tell me why you thought that anyway. I want to hear the whole thing.”

He told her all of it, even about the visions of Pyotr and his lover. It felt good to tell someone every detail, and there were very few people in the entire world that he would trust with that kind of information *and* take him seriously. Beverly was at the top of the list, at a far higher position than Jack.

At the mention of Hannibal and the journal, she perked up. “And you’re going to see it?” she asked.

Will nodded and took a sip of his tea before setting it back down on the saucer. “He says he’s going to call on me to go to dinner with him and discuss the results,” he said.

That delighted her far more than it should have. She grinned and rested her chin on her propped up hand. “You sound like a regular paranormal investigator, *and* you have a partner-in-crime. You ever think of checking out those occult societies around here?”

“Societies?”

“Mhmm,” she hummed. “Most of them are just groups of skeptics solving ghost stories and figuring out how people bend spoons. But there’s a few out there that actually have libraries of information about things like this. They might be worth a visit.”

Despite himself, Will was interested. “How do I find people like that? I don’t think they advertise in the newspaper.”

“You know someone who knows someone, typically,” Beverly replied, waving her free hand in slow circles in the air. “But still, even if your killer isn’t a vampire, or someone pretending to be one, he might still have something to do with them, like you told Jack.”

“I told Jack he was in a cult. I’m not to keen about hunting for one of those.”

She grinned a little wider. “You’re telling me you’re not interested in seeing one of them for yourself?”

“Beverly, I don’t want to be doing *this* as it is, let alone going to watch a cult do something... I don’t know, what do they do? Kill chickens and drink their blood?”

“Or people,” she said thoughtfully. “Your killer could be doing that with human blood. Imagine if you caught him in the act! London would be talking about you for *months*.”

“I don’t want London to be talking about me at *all*,” Will said sourly. “Hell, I didn’t want to work on this case in the first place.”

“Can’t pretend you’re not interested,” she pointed out again.

He couldn’t lie to himself and say he wasn’t. For that matter, Will knew himself well enough to know that if he didn’t do anything, the phantom of Pyotr Demidov would haunt him. He had seen plenty of strange cases before, and had experienced things he was likely to never experience again. Yet this case would be the first of its kind in his life, and perhaps something of a singular value to the Yard and London as a whole.

When he didn’t say anything, too lost in thought to form a proper reply, Beverly reached across the table and nudged his elbow with the back of her hand. “And you get dinner out of it with a doctor. That’s not too bad, right?”

Right. There was absolutely no way that Will could turn Hannibal down at that point. But it was less out of a sense of obligation or gratefulness. *What* it was for was harder to define than Will thought, but his mind already began forming images of Hannibal’s face in candlelight, the glow defining the edges of his cheekbones and the sharp angles of his face, the peculiar glint in his eyes. It had only been a day, but Will couldn’t jerk his mind away from that line of thought. Beverly seemed to pick up on this, and while she didn’t press, her grin became more mischievous. It was best to beat her at the pass before she could prod a little more.

“Right,” Will said, feeling a minute thrill that chased the ghosts away again. He couldn’t help

the smile that worked its way onto his face, and he hid it with a sip of his tea. “I... I’m looking forward to it.”

Chapter End Notes

Poem is Song (or 'Old Adam') by Thomas Lovell Beddoes. Very creepy and has some equally creepy art made for it. It's definitely worth a look!

End Notes

Here is an extremely well-written dissertation on Victorian era autopsies and forensic investigation: http://www.casebook.org/dissertations/rip-victorian-autopsy.html

The poem is 'The Song of the Wreck' by Charles Dickens. :D Yay Charlie!

Please drop by the Archive and comment to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!